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Prison inmates paint picture of the 'outside'

By Mark Whittington

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Soledad inmates have escaped the prison walls, at least in their minds' eyes.

The "escape" is a mural by inmate artists, who unveiled their work last Friday at the prison's north facility.

"They wanted to do something that would open the walls visually," said Guillermo Aranda, a Watsonville artist who helped the inmates create the 6-by-12-foot painting.

Aranda described the painting as a landscape with a shifting point-of-view.

"There are bird's eye views. Then you find yourself at the bottoms of trees," Aranda said. "As you move along the mural, your perspective keeps changing."

Aranda works in the "arts in corrections" program, which brings professional artists into the state prisons.

Aranda and the inmates began working on the project last October. It took them seven months just to plan the mural. The inmates did individual drawings, and Aranda helped meld them into a composition.

Then, the inmates discussed the ideas and came up with the plan for the mural.

"They were very enthused," Aranda said. "It helps them to leave that world in the yard and back in the cells. It takes them away from their life, even if it's only for the moment."

Aranda started with 50 inmates. Only one had had any formal art training. The others were starting from scratch and began with basic drawing and composition before moving on to pastels, watercolors and acrylics.

"Self-expression is a healthy thing in



CLAY PETERSON/The Californian

Soledad Prison inmate Will Cantrell works on a 6-by-12-foot mural he and other inmates created at the prison. Watsonville artist Guillermo Aranda helped inmates with the project, which is part of the "arts in corrections" program.

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any community," said Jack Bowers, director of the prison arts program. "There are very few opportunities for self-expression here."

In addition to the visual arts program, selected inmates can also participate in music and writing programs, Bowers said. The program started six years ago under legislation sponsored by state Sen. Henry Mello, D-Watsonville.

A sociologist's study showed that the arts program pays for itself by cutting disciplinary problems among the inmate

artists, Bowers said.

The inmates who worked longest on the mural were Landon Scott, Will Cantrell, Rick Armington, Manuel Aceves, Harold Trujillo, Carlos Sagastume, Bruce Galli, Steve Atkins, Daniel Rivera, Joe Torres, Albert Mesa and Jon Kaiser.

He also singled out Tine Nai-Wun, who has since transferred to the California Men's Colony in San Luis Obispo.

Arana said he has mixed emotions when one of his pupils is transferred or released.

"I'm really happy for them, but at the same time I know I'll miss working with them."

In addition to the mural, the artists are showing their individual works at a show in the prison's multi-purpose room. These include works in graphite, pastel, watercolors and ink.

That artwork will be available for showing outside the institution, Arana said. He said he's hoping to set up exhibitions in Santa Cruz, Monterey and Salinas.